Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, July 15, 2012 *Choral Eucharist*
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost *at 11am*

+
A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
on
Saint Mark 6:14-29
+

THE DANCING GIRL

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

It's a scandalous story, a sensual story, a titillating story, even. Salome dances for the king, who, in his (ahem) pleasure, rashly promises her anything she wants.

A great story, perhaps—but what does it have to do with Jesus, for crying out loud? He's not the protagonist of the story, nor is he referred to even a single time. This is certainly unusual; it wouldn't surprise me if this is the only gospel passage in the entire Sunday lectionary that doesn't talk about Jesus. But one of the things I'd like to do this morning is show how this scandalous story is all about the kingdom of God preached by the unnamed Jesus, a kingdom whose ruler does the impossible: brings food to the hungry, rescues the lost sheep, brings life—in abundance—to the dead.

But first, we should clear away some historical accretions that have attached themselves to Mark's narrative. Salome, as she is recorded in the Gospels,[1] is not a lotus flower of budding sexuality. In Mark, she is a little girl: *korasion*, says the Greek, "little girl" (6:21, 28). This is the same word used for Jairus' resurrected daughter in the preceding chapter (5:41). Not "young woman"; there are Greek constructions Mark could have used for "young woman," or even just "girl" (*kora*) if he had wanted, but he didn't. If Jairus' daughter of chapter 5 was one of Jesus' "little lambs," then so was Salome.

Second, if the dance was somehow sexual, that fact isn't recorded in the Gospel.[2] Nothing in the text itself indicates that Salome's dance was suggestive, and it certainly doesn't say anything about it being seductive. It's a little girl, dancing around, the way little girls sometimes do.

Finally, if Herod was being lascivious, that fact isn't recorded in the Gospel, either. Mark says that the company's response to Salome's dance was to be "pleased"; *aresko* is translated "pleased" for

[1] Though she is unnamed in Mark and Matthew; the name comes from the Roman historian Josephus.

[2] It's named using the same word that Jesus reports the children saying, "We piped to you, and you did not dance" (Matthew 11:17 and Luke 7:32). All scriptural references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

us, and nowhere in the New Testament is that word used with sexual connotations.[3] There are Greek ways for Mark to have communicated a sexual subtext, if he had wanted, but the word used here isn't one of them. There simply isn't any scriptural evidence in this passage for that description of Herod and Salome.

I don't want to go on and on about this, but my point is that seeing Salome differently may cause us to read the scene differently, and provide a different insight into what Mark is up to. If Salome is in fact a little girl (by definition not yet a teenager), dancing innocently, for a doting uncle—since even vicious tyrants have soft spots—then what we're left with, ironically, is something much more tragic than what we started with. The victim here is not only John the Baptist, but Salome, too: a little girl who becomes an unwitting accomplice to an adult dispute that suddenly turns gruesome and murderous. This is a dispute she has no interest in, but in which she becomes fully implicated. Indeed, she becomes the instrument that facilitates its bloody resolution. So she isn't most accurately described as one of the perpetrators of the crime; she is one of its *victims*.[4]

That victimhood is relevant if we see this story as illustrating, in minute, specific detail, the differences between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God. Mark may be answering the question as to what the kingdom of God is like, and he gives us a few examples to show us concretely what John would later write in his gospel, that Jesus came so that we may have life, and have it abundantly (10:10).

First, I mentioned already that in the chapter right before this one, Jairus' daughter is addressed by Jesus using the same word as Salome will be, "little girl" (5:41). So we get two stories about two little girls in very close literary proximity. We might even say, then, that the two girls are depicted symbolically almost as twin sisters; nearly identical, differing only in their circumstances.[5] In putting them together the Gospel writer may be saying that this is what the kingdoms of the world do: they take something truly beautiful—the joy of a little girl and the delight her dancing brings—and turn it into an occasion of terror and violent death.

By making this clear contrast with Jairus' daughter, Mark may be saying that, on the other hand, this is what the kingdom of God is like: it takes the unbearable tragedy of the death of a little girl, and the sorrow it brings, and miraculously transforms it into a joyful celebration of *life*; imagine the celebration that must have followed for Jairus, his family, and his synagogue. The impossible was made possible, because the Son of God has come to bring life and bring it in abundance.

Second, Mark shows us that the kingdom to which Christ points is one where people are fed, where everyone is fed: both with spiritual food, and also with food, food; again, the bringing of life. The very next thing that happens in the Markan narrative is the feeding of the 5,000; 5,000 people miraculously fed from five loaves and two fish. What could have been an instance of anxiety, fear, or a painful hunger, there next to the water, was instead turned into an illustration of the extravagance of Christ's desire for the health of his people. There is a contrast being made here between this and the grisly, and otherwise unnecessary, detail of John's head being brought back on

---

[3] Cf. the standard Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon (BDAG, 3rd ed.) entry for αρέσχω, pp. 129-130, particularly definition 2.b., which specifically mentions Salome. None of the uses reference sensuality.

[4] See René Girard, "Scandal and the Dance: Salome in the Gospel of Mark," *New Literary History* 15.2 (1984), 311-324.

[5] An excellent article on the subject, to which this sermon is indebted, is Regina Janes, "Why the Daughter of Herodias Must Dance (Mark 6.14-29)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28.4 (2006), 443-467.

a platter. (It's the platter that people remember.) Having the head on a platter turns it, symbolically, into the final course of a grotesque meal. John's body, broken for the king, is circulated, like bread, to ensure death. And of course later, in the Eucharist, Christ's body, broken for us, will be circulated *as* bread, to bring life, everlasting.

Finally, Mark uses this story to introduce the concept of resurrection, and it's introduced by—of all people—this same Herod,[6] who becomes an unwitting prophet. He's the first person to bring up the possibility of death being overcome by life, when he says, wrongly, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (6:16). These words would be echoed, almost verbatim, at the end of the Gospel by the angel outside the tomb, "Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised" (16:6). "John whom I beheaded has been raised"; "Jesus who was crucified has been raised." King Herod, the accidental prophet was, of course, wrong; Jesus was not the risen John the Baptist. But he was right that death would not be the final word for the Messiah. The God of Israel who had led the Hebrew people—Herod's people—out of Egypt had now sent a savior to break the bonds of death, for all people, forever.

So, this odd story, told in flashback, is one voice, granted in a minor key, that is part of the chorus of praise that Mark has composed. Mark shows us, through Herod, that the kingdoms of the world, stained by sin, are corrupting and malicious: they turn innocence into violence, they turn joy into sorrow, they turn life into death. But the kingdom of God, saved from sin, turns sorrow into joy, turns grieving into celebration, turns death—even death!—into life. Because the Messiah has come to bring life, and to bring it in abundance, to each and every person.

Even, perhaps, to Salome, that much-maligned little girl who was the other victim; the little lamb who witnesses, and then participates in, the barbarity and cruelty of human beings at their very worst. The text is painfully silent about her future. But perhaps it's not a coincidence that, at the very end of Mark's gospel,[7] three women go to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and a disciple named Salome, a woman who shares the same name as that young "daughter of Herodias."[8] Maybe Mark is telling us that no one is forgotten in the kingdom of God, that no little lamb can be led so far astray that the good shepherd can't find her, and bring her back.

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. *Amen*.

---

[6] The text suggests that the Herod story precedes temporally, if not narratively, the resurrection of Jairus' daughter.

[7] The scholarly consensus is that the earliest manuscripts end Mark's gospel at 16:8, with the "shorter" and "longer" endings being added in the post-3rd, and late-2nd, centuries, respectively.

[8] If we do see her as a projection of the dancing girl's future, then we note that she is no longer the nameless child, referred to by Mark only in relationship to her mother ("the daughter of Herodias"). Given a name, she has become her own woman, differentiated from her parents, no longer only a victim but now possessing her own agency and responsibility; she is a recipient of God's grace and a witness to the in-breaking kingdom of God. This image—of differentiation, naming, symbolic death and re-birth, and subsequent discipleship—is the image of baptism.